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HEADLINE: Abbas: Cease-fire with militants could be reached by next week

BYLINE: LISA J. ADAMS; Associated Press Writer

DATELINE: JERUSALEM

BODY:

Palestinian leaders could reach a cease-fire agreement with the Islamic militant group Hamas as early as next week, Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas said in comments published Thursday, just hours before a summit with his Israeli counterpart to discuss a peace plan that would end 32 months of violence.

The announcement is in line with Abbas' promise to stop militant attacks that have killed hundreds of Israelis since the latest violence began - a crucial requirement of the first phase of an internationally backed "road map" to peace.

The road map calls for parallel steps by the two sides, but Israel has demanded that Abbas crack down on violent groups before the rest of the plan is implemented. Abbas has pledged to stop attacks, but said he preferred dialogue over the Israeli demand that he arrest and disarm militants.

Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon were to meet Thursday night for their second summit in two weeks to discuss the three-phase, three-year blueprint for ending the bloodshed and creating a Palestinian state.

The meeting was turning into a preparatory session for a summit with U.S. President George Bush, which the White House announced would take place Wednesday in the Jordanian Red Sea resort of Aqaba.

Palestinian officials also said that they would demand an explicit Israeli statement recognizing their right to a state.

Abbas met last week with Hamas, but no conclusions were reached. Another meeting is scheduled for next week, by which time Abbas said he hoped to have an agreement.

"I believe that next week I will reach a cease-fire agreement with Hamas," the premier said in an interview published in Thursday editions of the daily Yediot Ahronot. Abbas said he also hoped to reach an agreement with the Islamic Jihad, but had not met with the group yet.

Hamas official Abdel Aziz Rantisi told The Associated Press on Wednesday that the organization might be willing to go along with a cease-fire if Israel calls off its military operations against Palestinians.

"Then Hamas is ready to halt targeting the Israeli civilians and limit the resistance against the soldiers and settlers inside the occupied lands," he said, indicating for the first time that Hamas might scale back attacks against Israeli soldiers and settlers in the West Bank and Gaza, a key Israeli demand.

Abbas told Yediot Ahronot that Hamas "will undertake to stop terrorism both inside the Green Line and in the territories," a reference to both Israel and the West Bank and Gaza. "They have overall responsibility toward the Palestinian people's fate," Abbas said.

Israel rejects the idea of a temporary cease-fire.

A senior Hamas leader in the Gaza Strip, Mahmoud Alzahrar, told Israel Radio on Thursday that the group was considering a cease-fire with no conditions attached.

"Hamas will discuss the issue of how to make a cease-fire," he said.

But the radio later reported that another senior Hamas leader in Gaza, Ismail Abu Shanab, outlined three conditions for a cease-fire: that Israel stop operations against Palestinians, free Palestinian prisoners, and withdraw from the West Bank and Gaza.

Military operations against Islamic militants continued early Thursday in the West Bank and Gaza Strip: Israeli troops occupied houses and exchanged fire with Palestinian gunmen, killing two members of Islamic militant groups, witnesses and the army said.

The first phase of the peace plan begins with statements from the Israelis and Palestinians renouncing violence and recognizing each other's rights to security and statehood.

At Thursday's summit, "We will demand an Israeli statement recognizing a Palestinian state," Palestinian Information Minister Nabil Abu Amr said Wednesday.

An Israeli official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Israel was prepared to issue the statement, but only after the Palestinians show concrete efforts to stop attacks against Israelis.

The Palestinian goal is a formal statement at the three-way summit in Jordan, where Bush plans to push implementation of the road map. Bush hopes to "focus on moving forward," White House spokesman Scott McClellan said.

At the same time, Palestinian Foreign Minister Nabil Shaath said, "We are ready to issue the statement that is mentioned in the road map and to implement all our commitments."

U.S. officials have indicated they do not plan to make changes in the road map, but will take Israel's reservations into account.

Amr said that at the Abbas-Sharon meeting, Palestinians would also demand an end to Israeli operations in Palestinian areas, lifting travel restrictions and releasing prisoners - all parts of the plan's first phase.

Israeli troops moved into the West Bank city of Jenin early Thursday and killed a member of the militant Islamic Jihad organization during an exchange of gunfire, Palestinian witnesses and the army said. The Israeli army said it tracked down and opened fire on an armed militant in Jenin, killing him.

In the southern Gaza town of Khan Younis, Israeli troops shot and killed a member of Hamas when he tried to escape, relatives said. The army said troops killed a Hamas militant and arrested 29 suspected militants, including seven Hamas members.

The army also destroyed five houses that Palestinians had evacuated days earlier during gunbattles in the southern Gaza town of Rafah on the Egyptian border, witnesses said. The army said the buildings were used by militants to manufacture weapons.

Wednesday night near the West Bank city of Hebron, two Israelis were slightly wounded after gunmen fired on a bus heading to the settlement of Kiryat Arba, the army said.

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AFX European Focus

May 29, 2003 Thursday 05:18 AM Eastern Time

SECTION: GENERAL

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HEADLINE: Abbas predicts ceasefire with Hamas by next week

DATeline: JERUSALEM

BODY:

Palestinian prime minister Mahmud Abbas said he will reach a ceasefire with the hardline Islamic movement Hamas by next week, in an interview published today.

"I believe that next week I will reach a ceasefire agreement with Hamas," Abbas told the Israeli daily Yediot Aharonot.

His comments come a few hours before a key meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to discuss implementation of the internationally drafted roadmap for peace, which calls among other things for an end to the violence.

"Hamas will undertake to stop terrorism both inside the Green Line and in the territories," Abbas said. "In the wake of the agreement with Hamas I hope also to reach an agreement with the Tanzim and Islamic Jihad, but we have not had a chance to meet yet."

The word Tanzim refers to armed groups linked to Fatah, the party founded in the late 1950s by Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Abbas, and the most important of which is the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades.

The Green Line is the line separating Israel from the West Bank.

"We are engaged in talks on this subject with the organizations' leaders abroad and with the activists in the prisons," Abbas added.

When he was sworn in a month ago, Abbas vowed to disarm radical militant groups in a bid to put an end to 32 months of bloodshed and implement the roadmap.

Hamas' political leader Abdul Aziz al-Rantisi suggested that the Yediot story was putting too optimistic a spin on the situation, saying he did not consider the newspaper to be a reliable source.

He told AFP in Gaza City that "Hamas is still discussing the issue at the highest level but we haven't reached a decision for the moment.

"Our position is unchanged, we agree to stop attacks against Israeli civilians if Israel stops its aggression against our people, the incursions and the assassinations. For a real ceasefire, we need attacks to be frozen on both sides."

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Agence France Presse

May 29, 2003 Thursday 4:08 AM Eastern Time

**HEADLINE: Violence rages in territories ahead of Abbas-Sharon meeting**

**BYLINE: ADEL ZAANOUN**

**DATELINE: GAZA CITY, May 29**

**BODY:**

Deadly violence continued to plague the West Bank and Gaza Strip Thursday as Palestinian prime minister Mahmud Abbas prepared to meet his Israeli counterpart, Ariel Sharon, to discuss a peace plan ahead of a three-way summit next week with US President George W. Bush.

Israeli troops shot dead a militant from the hardline Hamas group during a raid into the southern Gaza Strip city of Khan Yunis, Palestinian security sources said.

Relatives said the 24-year-old had been wounded and was being carried to his house when Israeli soldiers intervened and shot him dead in a nearby street.

The Israeli army said 29 people were arrested in the Khan Yunis sweep and moments later, militants from the armed wing of the radical faction were touring the city and calling over loudspeakers for bloody revenge.

Earlier, in the northern West Bank city of Jenin, a gunman belonging to Islamic Jihad was shot dead by Israeli troops, the group's local leader and Palestinian medical sources told AFP.

The army said it sent in some 20 tanks and armored personnel carriers to dismantle the infrastructure of cells suspected of preparing anti-Israeli attacks.

Troops also moved into the southern Gaza Strip city of Rafah, and blew up four houses, damaging another 20, Palestinian security sources said.

Palestinian homes along the border with Egypt are demolished almost daily as the Israeli army is erecting a wall that cuts right through the heart of the divided city.

Also setting a tense backdrop for the Abbas-Sharon peace talks, Jewish settlers have showed their opposition to the roadmap by setting up two new wildcat outposts in the southern West Bank, Israeli public radio reported.

These outposts are even forbidden under Israeli law and whether they are dismantled will be seen as a test for Sharon's willingness to implement the roadmap.

The internationally drafted document calls for a halt to settlement activity and the dismantling of the more than 60 outposts set up on West Bank hilltops since Sharon came to power in March 2001.

The blueprint, published a month ago and reluctantly accepted by the Israeli cabinet last Sunday, paves the way for the creation of a Palestinian state by 2005 but demands an end to attacks by radical Palestinian groups.

In an interview with Israel's top-selling daily Yediot Aharonot, Abbas said he was convinced he could reach a truce with Hamas by next week, when he is due to join Sharon and US President George W. Bush in a three-way summit in Jordan.

"I believe that next week I will reach a ceasefire agreement with Hamas," he told the newspaper.

"Hamas will undertake to stop terrorism both inside the Green Line and in the territories," Abbas said. "In the wake of the agreement with Hamas I hope also to reach an agreement with the Tanzim and Islamic Jihad, but we have not had a chance to meet yet."

The word Tanzim refers to armed groups linked to Fatah, the party founded in the late 1950s by Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Abbas, and the most important of which is the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades.

The Green Line is the line separating Israel from the West Bank.

Hamas' military wing has carried out the bulk of recent suicide attacks inside Israel, but says it would accept a truce if Israel halts its military operations in the Palestinian territories.

The group said Thursday a ceasefire was being discussed "at the highest level" but that a decision had not yet been reached.

The Haaretz newspaper quoted Israeli government sources as saying Sharon was expected to offer Abbas gradual control of reoccupied Palestinian towns during Thursday's meeting.

With two days left before its first phase expires, the roadmap has had no impact on the ground, and Bush's personal involvement in the process next week is expected to boost the plan's prospects.

Bush is due to meet the Israeli and Palestinian premiers in the Red Sea resort of Aqaba on June 4, a day after an initial summit with Arab leaders in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh.

"Bush's personal entry into Middle East politics is a much-needed opportunity to find a lasting solution to the Israeli-Arab conflict," Palestinian information minister Nabil Amr told AFP.

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The Guardian (London)

May 29, 2003

SECTION: Guardian Weekly Pages, Pg. 1

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HEADLINE: Bush to hold Middle East peace summit: Washington pushes the pace after Israeli cabinet reluctantly approves 'road map'

BYLINE: Chris McGreal in Jerusalem

BODY:

George Bush will meet Israeli, Palestinian and Arab leaders in the Middle East next week to push forward the US-driven "road map" to peace after its conditional and reluctant approval by the Israeli cabinet last Sunday.

The Israeli and Palestinian prime ministers, Ariel Sharon and Mahmoud Abbas (better known as Abu Mazen), were due to hold their second face-to-face meeting this week.

The Palestinian foreign minister, Nabil Shaath, said on Tuesday that Mr Bush would hold two separate summits next week. "There will be two summits - an Arab-American summit and then there will be the summit of Palestinians, Israelis and Americans with the participation of at least the leader of the country where it will be held," he told reporters at a Euro-Mediterranean foreign ministers' meeting in Crete.

The summits are expected to take place in either Aqaba in Jordan or Sharm el-Sheikh in Egypt.

The meeting is seen by the Palestinians and Israelis alike as a test of the seriousness of Mr Bush's commitment to the peace plan, and his willingness to put pressure on Mr Sharon to adhere to the road map's requirements for Israel to give up Jewish settlements and establish a viable, independent Palestinian state.

Last week Mr Bush said he would meet Mr Sharon and Mr Abbas if it would promote peace. But US officials have said that the administration wants to see practical demonstrations of commitment to the road map from both sides in the coming days.

Mr Sharon typically offered mixed signals on his commitment to the peace process on Monday. He told Israel radio that he will "make every effort" to advance the road map despite his own doubts about the document.

Yet later in the day he reassured one of his party's parliamentarians that the government would continue to expand Jewish settlements in the occupied territories, even though the first stages of the road map require Israel to dismantle smaller illegal outposts and to freeze expansion of larger settlements.

"(The road map) certainly allows the unlimited building for your children and grandchildren, and I hope even for your great-grandchildren," Mr Sharon said.

The first stage of the agreement requires the Palestinian authorities to launch "sustained, targeted and effective operations aimed at confronting all those engaged in terror, (the) dismantlement of terrorist capabilities and infrastructure" and to undertake democratic reforms.

The Israelis are required to withdraw from Palestinian areas occupied since the launch of the intifada in September 2000, to ease the humanitarian burden on Palestinian civilians and to freeze or dismantle settlements.

The Israelis continue to insist that Mr Abbas has to "prove" his commitment to "fighting terror" before Israel meets its obligations, whereas the Palestinians point out that the road map specifically states that there is to be parallel implementation.

On Monday Mr Sharon attempted to reassure angry members of his party who attacked his decision to push through the cabinet vote on the plan without consulting them.

"It is not possible to continue holding 3 1/2 million people under occupation," Mr Sharon told them. "This is a terrible thing for Israel, for the Palestinians and for the Israeli economy."

But dissent is widespread. A partner in Mr Sharon's coalition, the far-right National Union party, has split over whether to bring down the government over the cabinet's backing of the road map.

Shaul Mofaz, the defence minister, distanced himself further from the plan by saying the cabinet vote was not a commitment.

A Palestinian schoolgirl walks past a mural of an exploding Israeli tank in Alshataa camp in Gaza  
Photograph: Hatem Moussa/AP

Comment, page 7

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## **Stage set for crucial meetings on Mideast**

**Greg Myre/NYT NYT**  
Thursday, May 29, 2003

### **Sharon and Abbas to talk first, then Bush gets involved**

**JERUSALEM** With Middle East diplomacy gathering momentum, the Israeli and Palestinian prime ministers plan a crucial meeting Thursday, with both sides saying it is time to move forward on an international peace plan. But each party is looking for the other to go first.

The outcome of the meeting between Israel's Ariel Sharon and the Palestinians' Mahmoud Abbas will also set the tone for a planned meeting of the two leaders and President George W. Bush at Jordan's Red Sea resort of Aqaba on Wednesday.

In talks on Thursday, the Palestinians want an explicit Israeli statement accepting eventual Palestinian statehood, said a Palestinian legislator, Saeb Erekat. "This should be the main theme of the meeting," Erekat said. "The Palestinians are looking for a signal that we are turning the page and entering a new era." The Israelis, meanwhile, want the Palestinians to specify areas where their security forces can take control and crack down on militants, and then Israel would be willing to pull back its troops, said Raanan Gissin, a spokesman for Sharon. "The Palestinians should take as much as they can chew, and we will hand over security responsibility," Gissin said. "We're not asking 100 percent success, but we want to see real steps being taken." The two meetings over the next week are part of the most ambitious effort yet to end 32 months of Middle East fighting that has claimed the lives of more than 2,000 Palestinians and 700 Israelis.

Sharon and Abbas met May 17 in the highest-level talks between Israelis and Palestinians since the violence began. Palestinian militants carried out five suicide bombings over three days shortly before that meeting, with the first attack coming two hours before its start. But the two sides agreed to keep talking.

Sharon has been boycotting the Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat, and Arafat will not be attending either meeting. But he is still regarded as the pre-eminent Palestinian figure, and he will be a major force in any negotiations.

The Palestinians have endorsed the international peace plan, known as the "road map," while Israel has accepted it in principle, with reservations.

But so far, both sides have been hesitant to take the key steps specified in the first stage of the three-phase process, which seeks to achieve a Middle East peace settlement and a Palestinian

state within three years.

Abbas, in an interview published Wednesday in the Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz, said the Palestinians were ready to begin taking security control of areas that Israeli troops have held for much of the past year. But he said the Palestinian security forces, which have been hit hard by Israeli military operations, were still regrouping. "I told Sharon we are prepared to do this," said Abbas, widely known as Abu Mazen. But, he added, "it is impossible to achieve 100 percent success in a brief period." Violence continued Wednesday, but at relatively low levels.

Three Palestinian youths, including a 15-year-old boy, were wounded when Israeli troops battled stonethrowers in the West Bank town of Tulkarm, according to Palestinian witnesses and the Israeli military.

Palestinian militants in northern Gaza fired a rocket that hit a home in the Israeli town of Sederot, but no one was hurt, Israeli authorities said.

Also, a member of Arafat's Force 17 guard unit was shot to death in Ramallah, said Palestinians, who blamed Israel. But Israeli security sources said Israel had nothing to do with the shooting.

Sharon's cabinet gave qualified approval to the road map on Sunday, but the Israelis have listed 14 reservations. The Palestinians say they want it implemented in its current form.

"We do not accept each side picking and choosing only those specific elements that are convenient for them in the road map," Abbas told Ha'aretz. "We are saying to the Israelis, 'Follow the map and don't waste time over details.'" The June 4 meeting with Bush should give some indication of how the Americans plan to deal with the conflicting demands. The Bush administration has pledged to address the Israeli concerns, but says it does not want to rework the road map.

One of the main Israeli concerns is the status of some 4 million Palestinian war refugees and their descendants. Israel says the Palestinians must give up its demand that the refugees be allowed to return to Israel.

But Abbas, himself a refugee from the 1948 Middle East war, said the Palestinians were not relinquishing that demand. The road map says that this and other difficult issues should be dealt with in the final phase of negotiations.

Israel says it wants the position clarified before it agrees to such steps as a provisional Palestinian state.

"Israel will never allow the return of Palestinian refugees to Israel," said Silvan Shalom, Israel's foreign minister, "because it means the end of Israel as a Jewish state."

The New York Times

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The New York Times

May 29, 2003, Thursday, Late Edition - Final

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HEADLINE: Sharon and Abbas to Meet, With Quite Different Agendas

BYLINE: By GREG MYRE

DATELINE: JERUSALEM, May 28

BODY:

With Middle East diplomacy gathering momentum, the Israeli and Palestinian prime ministers are planning to have a crucial meeting on Thursday, with both sides saying it is time to move forward on an international peace plan. But the antagonists have set very different priorities.

The outcome of the talks between Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel and the new Palestinian prime minister, Mahmoud Abbas, will also set the tone for a planned summit meeting between the two leaders and President Bush at the Red Sea resort of Aqaba in Jordan next week.

In Thursday's discussions, the Palestinians want an explicit Israeli statement accepting eventual Palestinian statehood, said Saeb Erakat, a Palestinian legislator.

"This should be the main theme of the meeting," he said. "The Palestinians are looking for a signal that we are turning the page and entering a new era."

Israel, meanwhile, wants the Palestinians to specify areas where their security forces can take control and crack down on militants, after which Israel would be willing to pull back its troops, said Raanan Gissin, a spokesman for Mr. Sharon.

"The Palestinians should take as much as they can chew, and we will hand over security responsibility," Mr. Gissin said. "We're not asking 100 percent success, but we want to see real steps being taken."

The Israeli and Palestinian demands are listed in the Middle East peace plan, known as the road map. But the parties have not yet agreed on how to get started.

The Israelis say there must be a drop in violence before they will begin making concessions. "The first step is to stop terror," Mr. Gissin said.

But the Palestinians say the two sides need to act simultaneously. "The obligations are as clear as the sun in Jericho in July," Mr. Erakat said, referring to his sun-scorched hometown.

The two meetings over the next week are part of the most ambitious effort yet to end 32 months of Mideast fighting that has claimed the lives of more than 2,000 Palestinians and 700 Israelis.

Mr. Sharon and Mr. Abbas met on May 17 in the highest-level talks between Israelis and Palestinians since the violence began. Palestinian militants carried out five suicide bombings over three days, with the first attack coming just two hours before that meeting.

But the two sides agreed to keep talking. Thursday's session will be held in Jerusalem, though the exact location was not released for security reasons, officials said.

Mr. Sharon has been boycotting Yasir Arafat, the Palestinian leader, and he will not be present at either summit. However, Mr. Arafat is still regarded as the pre-eminent Palestinian figure, and will be a major force in any negotiations.

The Palestinians have endorsed the peace plan, while Israel has accepted it in principle, with reservations. The United States, along with the United Nations, Russia and the European Union are backing the plan, which seeks a Middle East peace settlement and a Palestinian state within three years.

Mr. Abbas, in an interview published today in the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, said the Palestinians were ready to begin establish security control of areas Israeli troops have held for much of the last year. But he said the Palestinian security forces, which have been hard hit by Israeli military operations, were still regrouping.

"I told Sharon we are prepared to do this," said Mr. Abbas, who is widely known as Abu Mazen. But, he added, "it is impossible to achieve 100 percent success in a brief period."

Violence continued today, but at relatively low levels.

Three Palestinian youths, including a 15-year-old boy, were wounded when Israeli troops clashed with people throwing stones in the West Bank town of Tulkarm, according to Palestinian witnesses and the Israeli military.

Palestinian militants in the northern Gaza Strip fired a rocket that hit a home in the Israeli town of Sederot, but no one was hurt, Israeli authorities said.

Mr. Sharon's cabinet gave qualified approval to the peace plan on Sunday, but the Israelis have listed 14 reservations, while the Palestinians say they want it put into effect in its current form.

"We do not accept each side picking and choosing only those specific elements that are convenient for them in the road map," Mr. Abbas told Haaretz. "We are saying to the Israelis, 'Follow the map and don't waste time over details.'"

The meeting with Mr. Bush, which the White House announced today, should give some indication of how the Americans plan to deal with the conflicting demands. The Bush administration has pledged to address the Israeli reservations, but says it does not want to rework the peace plan.

<http://www.nytimes.com>

GRAPHIC: Photo: An Israeli soldier yesterday stopped Palestinian residents of Hebron from entering a neighborhood where rival clans have clashed. The fighting left one Palestinian dead and several shops destroyed. (Agence France-Presse)

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The San Diego Union-Tribune

May 22, 2003, Thursday

SECTION: NEWS;Pg. A-22

LENGTH: 421 words

HEADLINE: Israelis' show of force in Gaza brings Abbas' tour plans to halt

BYLINE: Nidal al-Mughrabi; REUTERS

BODY: BEIT HANOUN, Gaza Strip -- Israeli tanks forced the Palestinian prime minister to scrap a tour in the Gaza Strip yesterday, a blow to a peace plan that President Bush may try to rescue on a possible visit.

The cancellation of the trip to Beit Hanoun in northern Gaza was another setback to hopes that had been lifted by Bush's indicating his more direct role in pushing a peace "road map," which has been threatened by a wave of Palestinian suicide bombings.

Fifteen tanks took up positions just inside Beit Hanoun and bulldozers dug up earth nearby. Troops put up razor wire with a sign saying "Security zone, no entrance" before Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas, also known as Abu Mazen, was due to arrive.

"Israel must cease its escalations (of violence) and invasions of Palestinian areas because these actions only feed the cycle of violence and deepen hatred between the two peoples," Abbas said in a statement explaining the cancellation.

The tanks would have provided a humiliating backdrop for Abbas' tour, during which he had planned to talk to residents and inspect damage after an army raid intended to halt rocket attacks from the town into nearby southern Israel.

The tanks returned to Beit Hanoun hours after pulling out Tuesday, dashing hopes that the withdrawal was an initial step in implementing the peace plan drawn up by the United States, United Nations, European Union and Russia.

"They are escalating their aggression against our people and until now they did not give one answer to accept the road map, although we have accepted it from the beginning," Palestinian President Yasser Arafat said in the West Bank city of Ramallah.

Bombings by Palestinian militants have dimmed hopes for the plan, as has the daily violence. Witnesses said troops shot to death two Palestinians, a young man and a woman, during a stone-throwing incident near Ramallah yesterday.

Bush called Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on Tuesday to try to salvage the road map. The New York Times said he could meet both leaders during a visit he is considering to U.S. troops in Kuwait or Qatar this month.

Palestinian Minister of Security Affairs Mohammed Dahlan said on Israel's TV Channel 10 that he thought Abbas would not travel to Washington "as long as President Arafat is being held prisoner (in Ramallah) surrounded by Israeli tanks."

Five suicide bombings since Friday have undermined Abbas' pledges to halt violence in the almost 32-month-old uprising for an independent Palestinian state.

GRAPHIC: 1 PIC; Abd Katib / Getty Images; A Palestinian boy prepared to hurl stones at Israeli tanks in Beit Hanoun yesterday.

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## **William Pfaff: American Jews force Sharon's hand**

**William Pfaff IHT**  
Thursday, May 29, 2003

### **The road map II**

**PARIS** There suddenly seems hope that the "road map" to Middle East peace might succeed. Until now, it has been hard to take U.S. endorsement of the plan as more than a cynical concession to allied and international opinion, meant to disarm opposition to the war in Iraq and later be forgotten.

The Sharon government has always opposed an independent Palestinian state, and the Bush administration has seemed to take its lead on Middle East policy from the Israeli right. Now President George W. Bush is backing the road map and has brushed aside Israeli objections with a promise that the United States will look after Israel's security.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in turn has forced his cabinet to say yes to the plan, and to accept the principle of Palestinian national independence. Moreover, Sharon has shocked his party and country by using forbidden words. He told members of his Likud party Monday that Israel is "occupying" Palestine, and that this can't go on.

This is an enormous change for a man who throughout his political life has supported colonization of the Palestinian territories. His government includes men who want to expel the Palestinians from their homes and lands into neighboring countries so as to annex those territories.

What happened?

There are several parts to the answer, but the most dramatic is that major figures in the American Jewish community want to go where the road map leads.

The New York Observer reports that Edgar Bronfman of the World Jewish Congress and Larry Zicklin of the New York Jewish Federation, together with 14 other leaders of the traditionally united American Jewish community, have sent a letter to U.S. congressional leaders endorsing the road map.

Philip Weiss, author of the news report, quotes one person involved with the letter as saying "we could have gotten 200,000 signatures." Another said this shatters the notion, generally held until now, that the whole American Jewish community would try to block the road map. "No one can

question the bona fides of the people who signed."

The letter tells Congress that the road map offers a chance "to escape the bloody status quo," implicitly acknowledging that Israel is trapped in a cycle of violence. This itself breaks with the official Israeli view that the Palestinians alone are responsible for the violence.

"The extremists have been driving this process for two and a half years," a signer says. "I accept the fact that Israeli policies have probably reduced the level of successful terrorist actions. But there's no future in that. We can't sustain that; it's not a solution."

The crucial message to American politicians is that if they support the road map, important Jewish leaders will back them.

There are other reasons why Prime Minister Sharon has changed position. One is that the current aggressive and oppressive occupation, with its repeated military forays into Palestinian communities, is going nowhere.

The second is that Israeli public opinion knows that policy has to change. According to the daily Yedioth Ahronoth, the road map is backed by 56 percent of Israeli opinion, with 34 percent opposed. To many, this looks like the last chance for peace.

The crucial factor, however, is that an important part of the American Jewish community has decided that enough is enough. There are still plenty of obstacles to the road map, and its enemies have yet to reorganize. But what the Jewish leaders in America have done just might be enough to tip the balance and bring peace, at last, to Palestinians and Israelis.

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